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ABSTRACT

Developed as part of an ethnic heritage studies program, this historical narrative of Mexican Americans in South Bend, Indiana, is intended to increase cultural awareness of minority groups. The document opens with historical background information beginning in 1877 during the presidency of Porfirio Diaz of Mexico. The narrative follows migration and population factors surrounding Mexican Americans. Because of the recruiting effort of an organization dedicated to improving living conditions, many Mexicans Americans migrated to South Bend which provided job opportunities in its industrial areas. The adjustments of the group in trying to change their life and still retain their ethnic heritage are discussed. Family, economic, dietary, and political problems are examined. (JR)

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THE MEXICAN-AMERICANS OF THE SOUTH BEND-MISHAWAKA AREA

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BACKGROUND

After the defeat of France in 1877, Porfirio Diaz, a Mixteca Indian became president of Mexico. He ruled Mexico for thirty-four years--longer than any other man in Mexican history. During his presidency, however, the number of people who owned land declined. Much of the native Indians' land was confiscated and given to those who helped Diaz. By 1910 one-half of Mexico was owned by fewer than 3,000 families. Approximately 95% of the people owned no land at all. Most people were trapped in the system of debt peonage. By giving their landworkers their pay in advance, the landowners were able to maintain a cheap supply of labor. For after the laborer would spend his pay, he would have to borrow from his landlord and thus he was required to work for the landowner once again. When the laborer died, his debts were passed on to his children.

In 1900, after Diaz had been president for nearly 25 years, 70% of the people still did not know how to read and write. Because of the government's inability to help the Mexican people, a new revolution started in 1910. For a short while, 16 months, it looked like the revolution had been completed without any bloodshed. After Francisco I. Madero, the leader of the new revolution and president of Mexico was assassinated, new fighting broke out. In both North and South Mexico there were great heroes fighting for the revolution--Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata. Villa fought in Northern Mexico. Born Doroteo Arango, he left his native village to become a bandit. Zapata was an Indian born in Southern Mexico. In 1914 these two men united and ruled all of Mexico for one year. Afterwards Venustiano Carranza became President and the fighting stopped. During these years of fighting hundreds of thousands of Mexicans escaped to the U. S.--mainly to Texas, Arizona and California. It is in these states

where the bulk of the Mexican-Americans presently reside. They usually arrived without money for the many years of violence had destroyed much of what they owned. Many of these refugees stayed in the U. S. after the revolution. Because of the revolution more than 700,000 Mexicans came to the U. S. Of this 700,000, more than 200,000 came between the years 1910 and 1920. In the next ten years nearly a half a million came from Mexico, the major geographical source.

At this time new farms were being developed in the Southwest, particularly in the Central Valley of California, the Gila and Salt River Valley of Arizona and Rio Grande Valley of Texas. This development increased the need for farm labor and provided incentive for many Mexicans to come to the U. S. Another source of employment was the expansion of the railroads in the Southwest during this time. Mexicans who immigrated during this period speak of la pisca (the harvest) and el traque (the track) as the chief sources of employment, geographic source of the greatest part of Mexico.

Mexican-Americans who worked in the fields or for the railroads usually lived in isolated communities. They rarely visited large cities and little contact with non-Spanish speaking except their employers was made. The Mexican immigrants tended to work for very little money, but were easily satisfied due to the condition they left in Mexico.

In about 1800 United States citizens began coming to this part of New Spain, many of whom espoused the idea that the United States had a Manifest Destiny to rule from Atlantic to Pacific. Then, in 1810 the Mexican independence movement began and culminated in 1821 with the formation of the Republic of Mexico. Northern Mexico felt both national movements. The State of Texas declared its independence by force during this period of political instability in Mexico City. Expan-

sionist President James K. Polk willingly went to war in order to force Mexico to cede all her northern territory to the United States. The Anglo-Americans won and acquired half of Mexico's territory. Thus, northern Mexicans found themselves "strangers in our land" as Anglo-Americans settled and confiscated Mexican holdings. Chicano culture developed, then, out of a Mexican/Indio heritage in reaction to an Anglo-American dominant culture. (Centro de Estudios Chicanos e Investigaciones Sociales, Inc.)

When the U. S. entered World War I, millions of jobs became available. This encouraged more Mexicans to come to America. Cities in the Midwest such as Chicago, Detroit and St. Louis became distributing centers for Mexican-American labor. Some factories would recruit workers in Mexico and bring them to this country on special trains. At the time of the Depression many Mexican-Americans returned to their homeland because of the lack of jobs here. The United States government began a policy of hunting down and deporting Mexicans who had entered the country illegally. Local governments, who had to pay welfare and unemployment benefits to their citizens, also were encouraged to leave or be deported to Mexico. Many who were sent back were illegal immigrants, but many others--including nearly all the children who were sent back--were born in the U. S. and therefore were citizens of this country.

The employment of Mexican-American farm workers resumed after the Depression. When the U. S. entered World War II in 1941, the government made an agreement with the Mexican government. This agreement allowed Mexicans to enter the U. S. and thus supply the labor needed in the agricultural states. The number of men who came each year during the war ranged from 30,000 to 60,000. These workers were called braceros or the helping hand. After the war, even greater

numbers came until 1956, when the number began to decline. Braceros worked in the fields of all the southwestern states and some went as far north as Oregon, Washington, Michigan and Wisconsin. Around 1927 there was a great increase in the number of Mexican-Americans who worked as laborers in Illinois and Indiana. Farm owners preferred to hire braceros because they worked for less money than Mexican-Americans. Also, the farm owner did not have to provide housing facilities for braceros. After many complaints from Mexican-Americans that braceros were taking away their jobs, the U. S. government ended the bracero program in 1964. While the braceros were entering the country legally, other Mexican workers entered illegally. In 1954, the U. S. government began a program to seek out persons who entered illegally and return them to Mexico.

Very often, the Mexican-American families of Southwest did not want to mix with the Anglos. They were offended by their customs and manners. Often when they wished to marry, they would return to Mexico and be married by a Catholic priest. This tended to foster a strong attachment to the land of the fathers.

Many thousands of Mexican-American families in the past have worked as migrant farm workers. There are still many migrant farm workers at present, but the number becomes smaller each year. Migrant farm workers move from one part of the country to another to work in the fields. The reason for the decline of migrant workers is two-fold: One, an attempt by Mexican-Americans to raise their people's standards of living; and second, the need has decreased since more and more farmers have machines that harvest their crops.

Migrant farm workers move very often. This makes it very difficult for their children to stay in school. Often the children are in a new school every few weeks or are needed to work in the fields. This hinders them in their attempts

to learn and often puts them behind. Another obstacle faced by Spanish-speaking children was the language barrier. Until 1968, when the federal government passed the Bilingual Act, there was no government encouragement of teaching Spanish in the elementary and secondary schools. Prior to this bill's enactment, many Spanish-speaking children were punished for speaking Spanish in the classroom. It is little wonder that 80% of the children in Texas with Spanish surnames drop out before completing high school. This lack of education prevents them from getting good jobs. Although most migrant parents leave the fields so that their children can obtain a good education, there are some who value education very little. These people feel that their education has helped them little and remember the sufferings of their school days. For other parents it is of necessity that their children are absent from school periodically. They must work and need someone to look after the younger children who cannot be left alone.

WHY THEY CAME TO STAY

As early as 1946 some migrants from the southwest came to work on the farms of South Bend's west side. Two of the first families in the area were the Lopezes and the Frank Martinezes. These early Mexican-Americans left the migrant streams in hopes that their children would be able to complete their education. Due to the migratory way of life, many children never finished an entire year of school.

The Mexican-American community in this area began to grow suddenly in the years 1965-1971. This was due to El Centro's recruiting of migrant workers into the area. Their aim was to improve the economic status of the Mexican-American immigrant. They felt that by relocating migrant workers in a northern industrial city with good job opportunities they could achieve this goal.

South Bend met both these qualifications. El Centro would try and recruit Mexican-Americans as they passed through the area as well as sending their representatives to Texas. Once the migrants decided to stay, El Centro would try and find jobs and housing for them.

In 1969, the United Mexican Americans was founded. Some of the leaders behind this organization were: Manuel Garcia, Frank Esmeralda and Gilbert Cardenas. The purpose of this organization was to aid the Mexican-American in the community who felt they were not being aided by El Centro. Later on, Olga Villa and Leo River started the Midwest Council.

With funds from the Department of Labor, they started the Manpower Program. This program has attracted many Spanish-speaking into the area. It provides them with some training, a stipend while they are studying and then job placement. Because the west side of South Bend offered housing that the Mexican-American could afford they settled there. Along the west side two Spanish speaking communities developed. One is the area around the old Washington High School which is now IVY Tech and the other is around St. Casimir's Church, the area bound by Ford and Sample.

ADJUSTMENTS

Mexican-Americans are facing a problem distinct from the experiences of other ethnic groups. They are trying to change parts of their life style and maintain their heritage in an American society that is much different from the one confronting the European immigrants. Added to this problem is the difference in the socialization process between the isolated Mexican-American community in Texas and the one in the city such as South Bend. The former socialization process is not conducive to the capacities needed in such a city.

In Texas Mexican-Americans lived in communities which, for the most part, were separate from the Anglo community. They had their own stores, churches, and recreation facilities. The dominant language was Spanish. In such an environment, the traditions, values, and folkways of their ancestors were easy to maintain. When they travelled on the migratory trail, they associated mainly with Mexican-Americans and were still able to maintain their life style. The mobility also served as to prevent the Anglo community from exerting any significant influence on the migrants. Because they were constantly moving, they were not able to come in close enough contact with Anglos to be exposed to their values and mannerisms. This mobility then tended to help the Mexican-American cling to his own life style.

A. Family

The family is the very core of the Mexican-American community. As migrant workers, the family lives, eats, works and sleeps together. This cohesive unit includes not only the nuclear family but many uncles, aunts, cousins. In such an environment, the rules for each member of the family were well subscribed and there is no question as to who is in authority.

When they leave the migrant stream, there are several factors that cause this family structure to change. Although many Mexican-American families still tend to be an extended one rather than a nuclear one, the cohesiveness has waned a little. This is due in part to the fact that the children are no longer under the consistent supervision of their parents. In the city they to to schools and come in contact with various aspects of the Anglo community. This contact may cause some conflict between children and parents in regards to recreation, attitudes and values.

B. Economics

Second, in an urban center, husband and wife do not work together as they did in the rural fields. Thus both have much contact with the Anglo community. Since most Mexican-American men have little education, they usually are hired as common laborers in local industries such as Kaiser Jeep (now the A M General) the 7 Up Company, Torrington, and Clivers. There they are subject to frequent lay-off and the seniority system. At present there is a high percentage of unemployed Mexican-Americans. This is because of the type of jobs they hold and the small number of years that they have been employed there. As migrant workers, Mexican-Americans had to pay only rent. When they buy a home, however, they not only pay the mortgage, but the utilities and taxes as well. Often this presents a problem in that it causes the Mexican-American to budget their earnings. Another adaptation that must be made is to the extremeties of climate. Sometimes the Mexican-Americans are unfamiliar with the cold winter and are not prepared in terms of adequate clothing.

In order to supplement their husband's earnings, many Mexican-American women in South Bend seek employment. Establishments that have a number of Spanish-speaking women in their employment are Notre Dame and St. Joseph Hospital. Sometimes, this forces the mother to leave her children at home unattended or with other family members. Until 1965 there was no day care center where mothers could leave their children. In that year Mrs. Concepcion Kino came to South Bend and began working with El Centro. At first she volunteered to watch working mothers' children at her home. As more and more people heard of her services her home became too small to accommodate all the children. After several years of struggle she was able to secure funds from the United Way to establish a day care center. Mexican-American men and women in the community volunteered their

services to help finish the building. The parents also chose the name of the center, El Campito.

Perhaps one of the hardest adjustments to make is the shift from the rural, freer lifestyle to the more confining nature of the factory. As a migrant, he can choose to take a few days off, if he wants. In a factory, advancement is dependent on regularity and dependability. Taking into account all the social and economic adjustments necessary, it is not surprising that some Mexican-Americans decided to leave the city and return to the migrant lifestyle.

C. Dietary

Along with the changes in economics and family there is also a change in the Mexican-American diet. Some food items he is used to are hard to find although there is one Mexican-American store in South Bend. Diet changes occur, also due to the influence of children. As they come in contact with other foods, they want to try them as do their Anglo friends.

D. Political

Until 1971, the Mexican-American in South Bend was not very politically active. Prior to this date, they voted in elections, but had never campaigned for a specific candidate. Another factor to consider is that prior to 1971 there was not a large Mexican-American community in this area. In mayoral election that year, specific candidates, especially Democratic, asked the Mexican-Americans for their support and received it. This marked the first time that they had become actively involved in an election. Since that time, many Mexican-Americans have become more actively involved in politics, both locally and nationally. The Mexican-Americans in this area follows the national trend of their ethnic group

to vote Democratic.

In the 1971 election, the Mexican-American population was actively involved in the election campaign of Jerry Miller, who received a significant percent of Chicano votes during the primaries. The Chicano community was encouraged to vote a straight Democratic ticket.